DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 680 UD 032 039

AUTHOR Joyner, Carlotta C.

TITLE Education Programs: Information on Major Preschool, Elementary, and Secondary Education Programs.

INSTITUTION General Accounting Office, Washington, DC. Health, Education, and Human Services Div.

REPORT NO GAO/HEHS-97-210R

PUB DATE 1997-09-15

NOTE 31p.; Report to the Chairman of the Education Task Force, Committee on the Budget, United States Senate. For the related report on postsecondary education, see ED 414 868. Major contributors include: Eleanor Johnson, Nancy Kintner-Meyer, Barbara Billinghurst, and Ellen Schwartz.

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PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Access to Education; Accountability; *Demography; Educational Administration; Educational Change; *Educational Equity (Finance); Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Aid; Federal Programs; *Government Role; Preschool Education; Program Evaluation

IDENTIFIERS *Department of Education; *General Accounting Office

ABSTRACT

This report, a letter to the Chairman of the Education Task Force of the Committee on the Budget of the United States Senate, summarizes work the General Accounting Office (GAO) has completed from 1990 through 1997 addressing early childhood, elementary, and secondary education issues. The GAO has identified the need for improvement in the Department of Education's management and oversight of education programs. A major weakness that has been identified is the lack of evaluations of program effectiveness and information about what works. Reports also addressed issues involving the design and implementation of management tools, such as controls on states' substitution of federal grant money for their own funding, allocation and accountability with respect to block grants, and mechanisms for identifying ways to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of tax expenditures as tools to achieve federal program objectives. Other studies have addressed demographic changes and their implications for preschools and elementary and secondary schools in the areas of early childhood education, education reform efforts, school facilities, and efforts to improve access and equity. The discussion of GAO reports is organized into the following themes: (1) management of preschool through grade 12 programs; (2) demographics; (3) early childhood programs; (4) access and equity (financial equity); (5) education reforms; and (6) school facilities. Work and conclusions related to each theme are summarized. Pertinent GAO reports are listed. (SLD)

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Human Services Division

ED 461 680

B-277892

September 15, 1997

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The Honorable Bill Frist
Chairman, Education Task Force
Committee on the Budget
United States Senate

Subject: Education Programs: Information on Major Preschool, Elementary, and Secondary Education Programs

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This correspondence contains information, requested by your office on July 18, 1997, summarizing work GAO has completed from 1990 through 1997 addressing early childhood, elementary, and secondary education issues. Also today, we are separately reporting on postsecondary education issues.[1] These summaries may be of use to your Committee as you define key education issues and clarify the federal role in addressing them.

Although federal spending for elementary and secondary education was less than 7 percent of all kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) funding in fiscal year 1996, the federal government spent more than $25 billion on early childhood and elementary and secondary education, with nearly $16 billion of this managed by the Department of Education. Two of the Department's largest programs target funds to disadvantaged students through title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 ($7.7 billion in fiscal year 1997) and to special education students ($4 billion in fiscal year 1997). Many other federal agencies also fund programs that have, at least in part, an emphasis on education. For example, Head Start, the largest federally funded preschool program, is funded through the Department of Health and Human Services. Head Start received an appropriation of about $4 billion in fiscal year 1997 and annually serves over 750,000 disadvantaged children.

[1]Education Programs: Information on Major Postsecondary Education, School-to-Work and Youth Employment Programs (GAO/HEHS-97-212R, Sept. 15, 1997).

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In summary, our work has identified the need for improvement in the Department of Education's oversight and management of education programs. A major weakness is lack of evaluations of program effectiveness and information about what works. Effective management is especially important and challenging given the complex array of multiple programs spread across not only the Department of Education but also other agencies. Our reports also addressed issues involving the design and implementation of management tools, such as controls on states' substitution of federal grant money for their own funding, allocation and accountability with respect to implementing block grants, and mechanisms for identifying ways to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of tax expenditures as a tool to achieve federal programmatic objectives. Finally, we have completed several studies that have addressed demographic changes and their implications for preschools and elementary and secondary schools in the areas of early childhood education, education reform efforts, school facilities, and efforts to improve access and equity.

We have organized the discussion of our reports in enclosure 1 according to several themes: management of preschool through grade 12 (preK-12) programs; demographics; early childhood programs; access and equity (financing education, compensating for adverse effects of poverty, meeting special needs of at-risk populations); education reform; and school facilities. Within each theme, we have summarized our work and conclusions reached as a result of our work. When our reports had recommendations, we have described them and noted what actions resulted. Enclosure II lists pertinent GAO reports.

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We are sending copies of this correspondence to the Chairman and the Ranking Minority Member of the Senate Committee on the Budget, the Secretaries of Education and Health and Human Services, other congressional committees, and other interested parties. We will make copies available to others on request.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this material further, please call me at (202) 512-7014. Major contributors to this letter include Eleanor Johnson, Nancy Kintner-Meyer, Barbara Billinghurst, and Ellen Schwartz.

Sincerely yours,

Carlotta Joyner

Carlotta C. Joyner
Director, Education and
Employment Issues

Enclosures - 2

INFORMATION ON MAJOR PRESCHOOL, ELEMENTARY, AND SECONDARY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

MANAGEMENT OF PRESCHOOL THROUGH GRADE 12 (PreK-12) PROGRAMS

Department Management

The Department of Education's strategic and operational management problems have been documented at length since its inception in 1980 by Education's Inspector General, congressional committees, many internal reports and task forces, and by us. However, little attention was focused on correcting these programs during its first 12 years as a Department. During the 1980s, staff levels diminished by 33 percent, while the Department's workload expanded by 70 programs, increasing the importance of sound management. Moreover, Secretaries of Education devoted little attention to departmental management during this period. The first Secretary of Education was in office only a few months before there was a change in administrations. The next Secretary made dismantling the Department a formal goal and did not request a budget for it in fiscal years 1983 and 1984. Until the early 1990s, subsequent Secretaries focused on external policy agendas, devoting little attention to departmental management.

Our 1993 report on the Department's management problems was used extensively by subsequent Secretaries of Education for improving departmental management. We recommended that the Secretary articulate a strategic management vision for the Department; establish a Department-wide strategic management process; enhance management leadership throughout the Department and strengthen agency culture through a number of specific measures; and create strategic visions and strategic plans for information, financial, and human resources management that are integrated with the Department's overall strategic management process.[2] Although the Department has made progress in improving many management functions, it still has a long way to go. For kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) programs, we remain concerned about whether the Department knows how well new or newly modified programs, like Title I, are being implemented; to what extent established programs are working; or whether it has the resources to effectively and efficiently provide needed information and technical assistance. Like other Departments, Education needs to focus more on the results of its activities and

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[2]Department of Education: Long-Standing Management Problems Hamper Reforms (GAO/HRD-93-47, May 28, 1993).

on obtaining the information it needs for a more focused, results-oriented management decision-making process. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, the expanded Chief Financial Officers Act, the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995. and the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996 give the Department a statutory framework to manage for results.

Program Assessment and Best Practices

In addition to Department-wide management issues, we also looked into the management of specific programs and highlighted best practices. Our work assessing program accountability identified that improved federal government oversight is needed in many areas, both in the Department of Education as well as other federal agencies overseeing education programs. For example, in 1993 we found that the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), which is overseen by the Department of Education, had not adequately accounted for its expenditure of federal funds and may have used federal funds improperly.[3] The Department of Education's review of the NTID at the time of our report was minimal, and no evaluation or independent audit had been performed. Similarly, in a review of the Department of Energy's precollege math and science programs, we found that although Energy invested more than $50 million in precollege education in fiscal years 1990 through 1993, Energy had not evaluated almost half of its 17 most resource-intensive projects, and of those evaluations that had been done, all were inadequate.[4] On the other hand, in 1991 we reported that the Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs had reduced its backlog of reports monitoring its programs, even though the frequency of monitoring visits to its programs had not changed since our earlier report issued in 1989.[5]

In our review of the Eisenhower Math and Science State Grant program, we found that current data were not available from the Department to assess this program and that the predominantly short-term math and science training provided by this program may not contribute significantly to achieving the

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[3]Deaf Education: Improved Oversight Needed for National Technical Institute for the Deaf (GAO/HRD-94-23, Dec. 16, 1993).

[4]Precollege Math and Science Education: Department of Energy's Precollege Program Managed Ineffectively (GAO/HEHS-94-208, Sept. 13, 1994).

[5]Department of Education: Monitoring of State Formula Grants by Office of Special Education Programs (GAO/HRD-91-91FS, Apr. 15, 1991).

national goal in math and science.[6] Similarly, in a 1995 review of the effectiveness of adult education programs found that although this program serves the educational needs of millions of adult learners, it has had difficulty ensuring accountability for results because of a lack of clearly defined program objectives, questionable validity of adult student assessments, and poor student data.[7]

Finally, in our work looking at best practices, we found two common themes. First, there are key program characteristics that surface repeatedly in promising strategies to address issues such as school violence,[8] school dropouts,[9] and school-to-work transitions.[10] These include strong program leadership, linkages between the program and the community, and the development of a clear and comprehensive approach. Second, few evaluations exist of successful strategies to solve these problems and that many of the evaluations that do exist lack the methodological rigor needed to determine effectiveness.[11] Head Start provides a particularly good example of the latter.[12]

Since Head Start's inception in 1965, federal funding for the Head Start program has increased significantly. Since 1990, Head Start funding has more than

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[6]Department of Education: The Eisenhower Math and Science State Grant Program (GAO/HRD-93-25, Nov. 10, 1992).

[7]Adult Education: Measuring Program Results Has Been Challenging (GAO/HEHS-95-153, Sept. 8, 1995).

[8]School Safety: Promising Initiatives for Addressing School Violence (GAO/HEHS-95-106, Apr. 25, 1995).

[9]Hispanics' Schooling: Risk Factors for Dropping Out and Barriers to Resuming Education (GAO/PEMD-94-24, July 27, 1994) and Hispanic Dropouts and Federal Programs (GAO/PEMD-94-18R, Apr. 6, 1994).

[10]Schools and Workplaces: An Overview of Successful and Unsuccessful Practices (GAO/PEMD-95-28, Aug. 31, 1995) and Transition From School to Work: States Are Developing New Strategies to Prepare Students for Jobs (GAO/HRD-93-139, Sept. 7, 1993).

[11]GAO/PEMD-95-28, Aug. 31, 1995; and Head Start: Research Provides Little Information on Impact of Current Program (GAO/HEHS-97-59, Apr. 15, 1997).

[12]GAO/HEHS-97-59, Apr. 15, 1997.

doubled–increasing from $1.5 billion in fiscal year 1990 to almost $4 billion in fiscal year 1997. During this period, Head Start also received additional federal funds to, among other things, increase participation and improve program quality. Yet, very little research has focused on program impact, and the body of Head Start research available is inadequate for use in drawing conclusions about the impact of the Head Start program. We have recommended that the Department of Health and Human Services include in its research plan an assessment of the impact of regular Head Start programs. Although the Department felt that clear evidence exists of the positive impacts of Head Start services, it did have plans to evaluate the feasibility of conducting such studies. Our reports highlighted a needed role by the federal government to collect and disseminate information on successful strategies in these various areas.[13]

In 1994, we recommended that the Department of Energy strengthen the management of its precollege math and science program by improving its evaluation component and restructuring or discontinuing projects that do not clearly support the national education goal of increasing students' mathematics and science achievement.[14] In two reports, our recommendations addressed improved oversight of vocational rehabilitation programs by the Department of Education's Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services Administration, including reviewing the adequacy of data on vocational rehabilitation programs and determining why disparities exist in services provided to clients of different races.[15] In response, the Department took steps to improve its data collection on services received by clients and to research the disparity in services for minority individuals. Finally, we recommended that the Secretaries of Education and Health and Human Services develop a coordinated approach for evaluating short- and long-term impacts of promising school-linked service programs as dropout prevention strategies and alternative service delivery approaches.[16] As a result,

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[13]Compensatory Education: Difficulties in Measuring Comparability of Resources Within School Districts (GAO/HRD-93-37, Mar. 11, 1993); GAO/PEMD-95-28, Aug. 31, 1995; and GAO/HEHS-97-59, Apr. 15, 1997.

[14]GAO/HEHS-94-208, Sept. 13, 1994.

[15]Vocational Rehabilitation: Evidence for Federal Program's Effectiveness Is Mixed (GAO/PEMD-93-19, Aug. 27, 1993) and Vocational Rehabilitation: Clearer Guidance Could Help Focus Services on Those With Severe Disabilities (GAO/HRD-92-12, Nov. 26, 1991).

[16]School-Linked Human Services: A Comprehensive Strategy for Aiding Students at Risk of School Failure (GAO/HRD-94-21, Dec. 30, 1993).

the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Labor convened a working group to look at developing a federal initiative to create and evaluate comprehensive early childhood family centers, with school-based sites being a main focus.

Multiple Programs

In recent years, our work highlighted programs that provide teacher training, programs serving at-risk and delinquent youth, and programs aimed at preventing substance abuse and violence among youth. In every case, we found that multiple federal programs exist, scattered throughout a number of federal agencies. For example, in fiscal year 1993, at least 86 teacher training programs in nine federal agencies and offices were funded by the federal government. For the 42 programs for which data were available, Department officials reported that over $280 million was obligated in fiscal year 1993.[17] In another report, we identified 131 federal programs that served at-risk or delinquent youth in fiscal year 1995. While over 60 percent of these programs were administered by two cabinet-level departments, an additional 14 agencies or other federal entities administered programs serving this population. The estimated total amount of federal appropriations dedicated to at-risk and delinquent youth in fiscal year 1995 was over $4 billion.[18] More recently, we updated this information with fiscal year 1996 data and identified 15 federal departments and agencies that administered 127 at-risk youth programs in fiscal year 1996. One hundred ten of these programs received funding in 1996. We could not determine the precise amounts of funds going specifically to youth in 30 of these 110 funded programs. However, the remaining programs received funding in excess of $4 billion.[19] We also recently testified on the multiplicity of federal programs providing substance abuse and violence prevention services for youths. We identified 70 federal programs located in 13 federal departments or other federal entities that

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[17]Multiple Teacher Training Programs: Information on Budgets, Services, and Target Groups (GAO/HEHS-95-71FS, Feb. 22, 1995).

[18]At-Risk and Delinquent Youth: Multiple Federal Programs Raise Efficiency Questions (GAO/HEHS-96-34, Mar. 6, 1996). This figure does not include programs that address general education, health, or nutritional needs, such as the largest Title I program or the school lunch program.

[19]At-Risk and Delinquent Youth: Fiscal Year 1996 Programs (GAO/HEHS-97-211R, Sept. 2, 1997).

had fiscal year 1995 appropriations of about $2.4 billion.[20] We also found multiple early childhood education programs funded by the federal government. A discussion of these programs follows under the section on early childhood education programs. The system of multiple programs scattered throughout the federal government has created the potential for inefficient service as well as difficulty for those trying to access the most appropriate services and funding sources.

Financial Tools

We have issued several reports in recent years that addressed issues involved with the design and implementation of some of the more important tools of government used to achieve federal objectives. A recent report summarized studies addressing the fiscal impact of federal grants, most importantly whether grants add to or replace state resources for aided programs and whether grants are targeted to places with greater needs and lowest fiscal capacities. We found that about 60 percent of federal grant funds are used by state governments to substitute for their own funding in program areas. Moreover, federal grants are generally not allocated to states with the greatest programmatic needs or those with the least fiscal resources. The report concluded that the Congress could reduce substitution by strengthening federal grant maintenance of effort provisions and targeting could be enhanced by formula redesign. Alternatively, the Congress could decide that high levels of substitution suggest that particular programs may no longer represent the best use of scarce federal resources.[21]

We also looked at experiences in implementing block grants in the 1980s and found that federal funding cuts were significantly offset by states' additional funding and that states reported enhanced administrative efficiency from the shift to block grants. Block grants raised several concerns from a federal perspective, however, including designing formulas to allocate funds to places reflecting relative needs and devising balanced accountability strategies that satisfy federal information needs without overly restricting state flexibility.[22]

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[20]Substance Abuse and Violence Prevention: Multiple Youth Programs Raise Questions of Efficiency and Effectiveness (GAO/HEHS-97-166, June 24, 1997).

[21]Federal Grants: Design Improvements Could Help Federal Resources Go Further (GAO/AIMD-97-7, Dec. 18, 1996).

[22]Block Grants: Characteristics, Experience, and Lessons Learned (GAO/HEHS-95-74, Feb. 9, 1995) and Block Grants: Issues in Designing Accountability Provisions (GAO/AIMD-95-226, Sept. 1, 1995).

In a 1994 report examining the use of tax expenditures as a tool to achieve federal programmatic objectives, we found that while these can be a useful part of federal policy, tax expenditures may also be less effective and efficient than other approaches for achieving federal objectives. Tax expenditures do not compete overtly in the annual budget process and, like spending entitlements, existing tax expenditures generally grow without congressional review. Policymakers have few opportunities to make explicit comparisons or trade-offs between tax expenditures and related federal spending programs. In our report, we suggested options, to both the Congress and the Office of Management and Budget, to increase these comparisons and improve scrutiny of tax expenditures.[23]

DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographic makeup of America's school-aged population has changed dramatically over the past 2 decades, with more children living in poverty and a rapidly growing number from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Because little information existed to help policymakers or educators assess demographic changes and the implications of these changes on education policy, in the early 1990s we undertook a body of work to analyze demographic information about preschool and school-aged children.

America's schools serve children from preschool age[24] through high school. Between 1980 and 1990, the total school-aged population declined by 5 percent to 44.4 million, and then has steadily increased since the early 1990s.[25] The number of poor school-aged children also increased by more than 400,000 to 7.6 million, with the greatest increases in the West and the Southwest. These children bring with them a new set of challenges for elementary and secondary schools to deal with. For example, many of these students change schools frequently, which harms their education. We found that in school year 1990-91, one in six of the nation's third-graders–over a half million–had attended at least three different schools since beginning the first grade. These children are often

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[23]Tax Expenditures Deserve More Scrutiny (GAO/GGD/AIMD-94-122, June 3, 1994).

[24]Issues in preschool demographics are discussed in the Early Childhood Programs section following.

[25]According to the Department of Education, total public and private elementary and secondary school enrollment is projected to rise from about 51.7 million in 1996 to 54.6 million by the year 2006.

from low-income, inner city, or migrant families, and many have limited English proficiency.[26]

The changing demographics of the nation's school-aged population and the growing number of at-risk students could put severe strain on our preschools and on elementary and secondary schools. Preschools may see increasing numbers of at-risk children entering who require services that may not currently be available, such as language or family support services. Increasing numbers of poor and at-risk school-aged children mean that many schools will have to address the needs of children who change schools frequently, are potential low achievers, and have other difficulties such as health and nutrition problems.

Our work contributed to changes being made that focused federal funding on the problem of student mobility. In 1994, the Improving America's Schools Act (P.L. 103-382) authorized the Secretary of Education to fund demonstration programs aimed at reducing excessive student mobility. As a further step to address student mobility, in a 1994 reauthorization of the Migrant Education Program, the Congress targeted program funding to migrant children who have changed school districts within the last 3 years. Low-achieving children who have changed schools frequently are less likely to receive Title I services than low-achieving children who have never changed schools.[27] In response to a recommendation that the Department of Education develop strategies to ensure that highly mobile school-aged children have the same access to Title I services as other children,[28] the Department has encouraged states and school districts to take student mobility into consideration in their Title I programs, particularly when a highly mobile population is the norm in their location. The act also contains provisions, proposed by Education, to promote better coordination of Title I services with other federally funded educational services, explicitly including services for migrant children.

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[26]Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education (GAO/HEHS-94-45, Feb. 4, 1994).

[27]Title I is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This act was amended by the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994.

[28]GAO/HEHS-94-45, Feb. 4, 1994.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Since 1990, we have conducted several studies examining the characteristics of early childhood education programs and the participation of children in them. In fiscal years 1992 and 1993, we found that over 90 early childhood programs in 11 federal agencies and 20 offices were funded by the federal government. Examination of these programs showed that one disadvantaged child could potentially have been eligible for as many as 13 programs. However, many programs reported serving only a portion of their target population and maintaining long waiting lists.[29] By the early 1990s, about 42.5 percent of all preschool-aged children–aged 3 and 4–were attending preschool. Preschool attendance is generally regarded as important in preparing children for entering school. During the 1980s, the number of poor and at-risk preschool-aged children–those who were most likely to face difficulties upon entering school and who would have benefited the most from preschool programs–increased significantly. However, preschool participation rates in 1990 for this population--poor 3- and 4-year-olds–were low, about 35 percent of all poor 3- and 4-year-olds as compared with over 60 percent of the highest income 3- and 4-year-olds.

As a contrast to the American system, we found that preschool participation is much higher in Denmark, France, and Italy. For example, France had 100 percent participation in public early childhood programs among all 4-year-olds.[30] However, unlike early childhood education systems in Denmark, France, and Italy that appear to be seamless, our patchwork of multiple categorical programs with firm eligibility cutoffs could lead to disruptions in services from even slight changes in the child's family status. For example, a child who lived in a family of four with an annual income below the official poverty line at the beginning of the year might be eligible for many of the early childhood programs; however, if the family moved or if the family income or work status changed slightly, the child might not continue to be eligible for any of the programs.

Research also indicates that disadvantaged children benefit most from early childhood programs that have a child development focus and provide a full range of human services. Head Start, the centerpiece of federal early childhood programs, is intended to provide a comprehensive set of services–such as education and nutrition, and dental and medical services–with an emphasis on

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[29]Early Childhood Programs: Multiple Programs and Overlapping Target Groups (GAO/HEHS-95-4FS, Oct. 31, 1994).

[30]Early Childhood Programs: Promoting the Development of Young Children in Denmark, France, and Italy (GAO/HEHS-95-45BR, Feb. 3, 1995).

child development. Many view this program as a major preschool provider for the poor. However, our work has shown that preschool participation in general is low among poor children and that Head Start is not the primary source of early childhood education among poor preschoolers.[31] Of those disadvantaged children that attended some type of early childhood center at the time of our study, almost two-thirds–or 59 percent–attended centers other than Head Start, and these centers often provided inadequate services or fewer services than Head Start centers. Even at Head Start centers, directors identified problems that significantly affect their ability to provide needed services to children and families. For example, Head Start directors reported problems with insufficient qualified staff to meet the complex needs of children and families, a limited availability of health professionals in the community willing to help Head Start staff in providing services, and difficulties in getting suitable facilities at reasonable costs.[32] In addition, as previously discussed, we are concerned about the lack of data on the impact of the modern-day, regular Head Start programs.[33]

ACCESS AND EQUITY

Financing Education

Our school finance work since 1990 has focused on the federal role in funding poor students, supporting state education agencies, and contributing to the nation's overall spending on education. We also analyzed the dominant role that states played in funding the high-cost needs of poor and other disadvantaged students who were often in school districts that had limited resources for funding education.

Our study of state education agency funding revealed that the federal share of this funding ranged from about 10 percent to about 80 percent across states and was partly determined by whether the state agency actually operated a federal program such as vocational rehabilitation services in addition to providing

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[31]Early Childhood Programs: Many Poor Children and Strained Resources Challenge Head Start (GAO/HEHS-94-169BR, May 17, 1994).

[32]Early Childhood Programs: Local Perspectives on Barriers to Providing Head Start Services (GAO/HEHS-95-8, Dec. 21, 1994).

[33]GAO/HEHS-97-59, Apr. 15, 1997.

administrative support.[34] Another study of state funding showed that despite state efforts to equalize funding, the total (state and local) funding per pupil in poor districts was less than such funding in wealthy districts in 37 states. This disparity existed even when the data were adjusted for differences in geographic and student need-related education costs.[35] Furthermore, our review of trends in U.S. spending demonstrated that the national average for real expenditures per pupil has leveled off since 1989 at the same time that the nation's population of students, particularly poor students, has increased and state shares of education funding have slightly declined.[36]

Compensating for Adverse Effects of Poverty

To compensate for the adverse effects of poverty on student achievement, the Congress established the Title I program to fund supplementary remedial education services for low-achieving students in high poverty areas. Title I is a formula-based federal education program that provides funds to local educational agencies based on the number of school-aged children in poverty as well as the level of poverty concentration. Our work from 1990 to 1997 addressed making changes to the Title I grant formula. We looked at how the formula could better target low-achieving children in high poverty areas and jurisdictions less capable of financing compensatory education services. We also looked at other issues relating to Title I financing.[37] Finally, we provided information on the extent to which a 1985 Supreme Court decision (Aguilar v. Felton)[38] led to alternative ways of providing Title I services that were often

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[34]Education Finance: Extent of Federal Funding in State Education Agencies (GAO/HEHS-95-3, Oct. 14, 1994).

[35]School Finance: State Efforts to Reduce Funding Gaps Between Poor and Wealthy Districts (GAO/HEHS-97-31, Feb. 5, 1997).

[36]School Finance: Trends in U.S. Education Spending (GAO/HEHS-95-235, Sept. 15, 1995).

[37]School Finance: Options for Improving Measures of Effort and Equity in Title I (GAO/HEHS-96-142, Aug. 30, 1996) and GAO/HEHS-95-3, Oct. 14, 1994.

[38]473 U. S. 402 (1985). In this decision, the Supreme Court held that public school teachers who provided Title I services on the premises of religiously affiliated schools violated the separation of church and state. As a result of the Felton decision, school districts had to find new ways to provide Title I services to private school students. To assist school districts in complying with the

more costly and initially resulted in fewer private school students receiving Title I services.[39]

We found that the way "need" was assessed in the Title I formula resulted in an underestimation of students needing services in areas with high concentrations of poor children.[40] As a result, the Congress revised the Title I formula as part of the Improving America's Schools Act to give a higher weighting for children in geographic areas with high concentrations of poor children. In addition, our work[41] contributed to the Congress' amending Title I to limit the extent to which the budgets of state education agencies can be funded by federal revenues--by October 1, 1998, more than one-half of the budgets of state education agencies are to be funded by state, rather than federal, revenues. We also provided the Congress with a variety of alternative ways to improve the current measures of fiscal effort and equity in per pupil spending[42] in Title I's Education Finance Incentive Program.[43]

Finally, in a 1993 report we found that although additional federal funds were made available to help school districts provide Title I services to private school students in neutral sites, such as in mobile vans or portable classrooms, the number of private school students in Title I programs remained low. However, such funds were useful in increasing the number of children that could be

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Felton decision, which often resulted in more costly alternatives to fewer private school students, Congress authorized additional funding. In June 1997, the Supreme Court lifted its ban on public school employees providing Title I services in religious schools in Agostini v. Felton, 117 S. Ct. 1997 (1997).

[39]Compensatory Education: Additional Funds Help More Private School Students Receive Chapter 1 Services (GAO/HRD-93-65, Feb. 26, 1993).

[40]Remedial Education: Modifying Chapter 1 Formula Would Target More Funds to Those Most in Need (GAO/HRD-92-16, July 28, 1992).

[41]GAO/HEHS-95-3, Oct. 14, 1994.

[42]By "measures of effort," we generally mean a state's spending for education when compared to its ability to pay for education. Our alternative measures of equity look at relative differences in education spending among districts within a state after adjusting for differences in the purchasing power among school districts and differences in the education needs of students.

[43]GAO/HEHS-96-142, Aug. 30, 1996.

served.[44] An earlier report[45] found that in the year following the Felton decision, participation by private school students in Title I programs dropped from 185,000 to 123,000 nationwide, as school districts began developing new ways of providing services to private school students. A follow-on report[46] showed that participation had increased to 142,000 students by school year 1987-88, but remained 23 percent lower than the pre-Felton levels. At that time, local districts had not yet received any additional funding. By school year 1991-92, additional federal funding made it possible to increase the number of private school students served by Title I to 168,000, or 91 percent of pre-Felton levels.

Meeting Special Needs of At-Risk Populations

Certain populations of children are particularly at risk of school failure, including those who change schools frequently, are potential low achievers, and have other difficulties such as health and nutrition problems. We have already discussed some of the needs of poor and migrant students in previous sections. We also have done a body of work focusing on students with limited English proficiency and on Hispanic dropout rates.

Our work from 1990-97 on students with limited English proficiency focused on various aspects of programs operated by the Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs. These programs include the Emergency Immigrant Education Act (EIEA) program and the Bilingual Education Act program. We provided information regarding the characteristics of students with limited English proficiency for use in the 1994 reauthorization of the ESEA and the Bilingual Education Act. Although students with limited English proficiency are heavily concentrated in a handful of states, almost every state in the nation has counties that have substantial numbers of students with limited English proficiency. We also found that immigrant students are almost twice as likely to be poor as compared with all students, thereby straining local school resources. Many students with limited English proficiency in school districts we visited received limited support in academic subjects, and districts could not provide bilingual instruction to all students with limited English proficiency. Federal funding for programs targeting these students has not kept

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[44]GAO/HRD-93-65, Feb. 26, 1993.

[45]Compensatory Education: Chapter 1 Services to Private Sectarian School Students (GAO/HRD-87-128BR, Sept. 21, 1987).

[46]Compensatory Education: Aguilar v. Felton Decision's Continuing Impact on the Chapter 1 Program (GAO/HRD-89-131BR, Sept. 27, 1989).

pace with the increase in this population. We also found, however, that many students eligible for EIEA funds also participate in other federally funded education programs but that estimates are difficult to obtain.[47]

In response to congressional requests, we also issued two reports that looked specifically at dropout rates among Hispanic students.[48] We found certain factors that increased the risk of dropping out for a Hispanic student. These factors include (1) not born in the United States, (2) limited in English-speaking ability, (3) from poor families, or (4) either married or are young mothers. Our work examining federal programs that would address the Hispanic dropout problem found that many federal programs are in place to address the high school dropout problem; however, program data were insufficient or of questionable reliability to allow an assessment of how well at-risk Hispanic students were served.

Special needs students present schools with special challenges. Immigrant students pose costly and increasing challenges for many school districts. Teachers need to be trained in effectively teaching a student population that does not have English as a first language. Other critical needs include developing appropriate curricular and instructional models and necessary assessment tools and assisting states and districts in adapting them to local needs.

EDUCATION REFORM

Between 1990 and 1995, we reported on (1) systemwide education reforms as well as schools' use of regulatory flexibility, site-based management, and charter school approaches; and (2) federal plans for developing education standards and assessments. These studies provided national information on reform implementation efforts or key issues such as standards. More recently, we reported on how America's schools were not designed or equipped to implement education reform (see the description of our school facilities work, below); the

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[47]Immigrant Education: Federal Funding Has Not Kept Pace With Student Increases (GAO/T-HEHS-94-146, Apr. 14, 1994) and Limited English Proficiency: A Growing and Costly Educational Challenge Facing Many School Districts (GAO/HEHS-94-38, Jan. 28, 1994).

[48]GAO/PEMD-94-24, July 27, 1994; and GAO/PEMD-94-18R, Apr. 6, 1994.

special education reform effort known as inclusion programs;[49] and selected specific topics that relate to choice, like our report on single-gender schools.[50]

Although most of our reports were descriptive, our report on systemwide education reform[51] developed a number of matters for congressional consideration, and our report on regulatory flexibility made a number of recommendations to the Secretary of Education and suggested a number of matters for congressional consideration.[52] Specifically, if the Congress wished to encourage district-level systemwide reform, it could enact legislation that would do the following:

- Support efforts to develop voluntary high national and state content standards and support development of exemplary assessment methods appropriate to those standards.

- Ensure availability of technical assistance and professional development to districts implementing or seeking to implement systemwide reform.

- Make existing federal categorical programs more conducive to systemwide reform. The Congress could, for example, allow waivers of program requirements or give priority for grants to applicants serving targeted groups in the context of systemwide reform.

The Congress could also direct the Secretary of Education to take steps to disseminate information about successful reform efforts and review the scope and functions of the federal research centers, laboratories, and technical assistance centers to determine the extent to which they could assist in systemwide reform efforts.[53]

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[49]Special Education Reform: Districts Grapple With Inclusion Programs (GAO/T-HEHS-94-160, Apr. 28, 1994).

[50]Public Education: Issues Involving Single-Gender Schools and Programs (GAO/HEHS-96-122, May 28, 1996).

[51]Systemwide Education Reform: Federal Leadership Could Facilitate District-Level Efforts (GAO/HRD-93-97, Apr. 30, 1993).

[52]Regulatory Flexibility in Schools: What Happens When Schools Are Allowed to Change the Rules (GAO/HEHS-94-102, Apr. 29, 1994).

[53]GAO/HRD-93-97, Apr. 30, 1993.

In our report on regulatory flexibility in schools, we recommended that the Secretary continue to assess the manner in which federal education programs are reviewed by federal and state officials and, as needed, promote changes in the way programs are reviewed by these officials in order to be more consistent with schools' attempts to improve.[54] As a result of this work, the Department has made major strides in promoting changes in the way federal education programs are reviewed and allowing more flexibility. For example, the Department has undertaken the Cooperative Audit Resolution and Oversight Initiative. This initiative aims to promote a better understanding of program requirements on the part of auditors and streamline audit procedures. It also provided professional development activities to familiarize staff, including program reviewers and auditors, with current concepts in school reform. In addition, in June 1996, the Department issued to program officials and auditors a new "compliance supplement" for ESEA, as amended by the Improving America's Schools Act. We also recommended that the Secretary of Education work with educators, researchers, and state and local officials to develop ways to assess the progress of children with special needs in relation to high standards. As a result, the Department began to support state and local efforts in developing ways to assess all children.

We also recommended that the Congress maintain features in education initiatives to take advantage of the flexibility provided to attempt improvement. The provisions in the Goals 2000 Act promote flexibility by giving the Secretary of Education authority to waive certain regulations to assist states and local communities in implementing school improvement. The act also promotes flexibility by supporting a wide array of state and local approaches to raise academic achievement and has no regulations for Goals 2000 implementation. Goals 2000 and the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 encourage states and localities to undertake systemic education reform and provide flexibility to promote bottom-up, school-based reform. The acts also reauthorize most of the federal government's programs of aid to elementary and secondary education.

SCHOOL FACILITIES

Based on a 1994 survey of 10,000 schools in over 5,000 school districts nationwide as well as site visits to 10 school districts, we reported that school officials reported about $112 billion was needed to bring America's schools into good overall condition. Of the $112 billion, officials estimate that our nation's schools need $6 billion to make all programs accessible to all students and $5

[54]GAO/HEHS-94-102, Apr. 29, 1994.

billion to correct or remove hazardous substances including asbestos, lead, pesticides and other chemicals, and radon. About 14 million students attended the one-third of America's schools that needed to be extensively repaired or replaced.[55] These schools were distributed nationwide. In addition, school officials reported that although America's schools meet many key facilities requirements[56] and environmental conditions[57] for education reform and improvement, most are unprepared for the 21st century in critical areas, such as the following:

- Most schools do not fully use modern technology. Although at least three-quarters of schools reported having sufficient computers and televisions, they do not have the system or building infrastructure to fully use them. Moreover, because computers and other equipment are often not networked or connected to any other computers in the school or the outside world, they cannot access the information superhighway.

- Over 14 million students attend about 40 percent of schools that reported that their facilities cannot meet the functional requirements of laboratory science or large-group instruction even moderately well.

Moreover, not all students have equal access to facilities that can support education into the 21st century, even those attending school in the same district. Overall, schools in central cities and schools with a 50-percent or more minority population were more likely to have more insufficient technology elements[58] and

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[55]School Facilities: Condition of America's Schools (GAO/HEHS-95-61, Feb. 1, 1995).

[56]Small-group instruction, teacher planning, private areas for student counseling and testing, and library/media centers.

[57]Ventilation, heating, indoor air quality, and lighting.

[58]Fiber optics cable, conduits, telephone lines in instructional areas, modems, networks, telephone lines for modems, electrical wiring for communications technology, electric power for communications technology, laser disk player/videocassette recorders, printers, cable television, computers for instructional use, and televisions.

a greater number of unsatisfactory environmental conditions[59]–particularly lighting and physical security–than other schools.[60]

[59]Lighting, heating ventilation, indoor air quality, acoustics for noise control, flexibility, physical security of buildings.

[60]School Facilities: America's Schools Not Designed or Equipped for the 21st Century (GAO/HEHS-95-95, Apr. 4, 1995).

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